DESIGNMATTERS
BUSINESS FOR
SOCIAL INNOVATION
FELLOWSHIP

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THE PREMISE

How can graphic design and the process of design-thinking be used to produce a system of support for low-income farmers in Myanmar’s rural villages?

The premise of my Fellowship at Proximity Designs in Myanmar was to explore ways in which graphic design and the design-thinking process could be used to create a system of support for Myanmar’s low income farmers and their families.

During the Summer, 2013, I teamed up with Proximity’s Farm Advisory Services (FAS) staff so that we could streamline their messaging and find new ways to reach our farming audience. It was a unique challenge for regions of the country with limited resources. The design-thinking process remains the same, however, and allowed me to help uncover individual communication problems and to create solutions with the resources available.

In this presentation, I will describe research trips to two regions of Myanmar — the Dry Zone and the Delta — what my team discovered on these trips, and the graphic design deliverables that we created to answer this premise.
ABOUT MYANMAR

A Crossroads
Myanmar, formerly Burma, is situated between India and China, two of the world’s most rapidly developing economies.

Multiple Revolutions
Myanmar is undergoing several revolutions simultaneously since the military released some control over the government, allowing the economy to more freely import and export goods, which has led to dramatic change.

- POLITICAL REVOLUTION
- INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION
- DIGITAL REVOLUTION
- COMMUNICATIONS REVOLUTION
ABOUT PROXIMITY

Proximity Designs is an award-winning, social enterprise based in Yangon, Myanmar. The company designs and delivers affordable, income-boosting products and services that complement the entrepreneurial spirit of rural families.

The photograph to the left is the Proximity Media Team, my Proximity family. From left to right, Khine Min Tun, Yin Yin Oo, Tim Mitzman, Min Min Hein, and Rani Robelus.
PROXIMITY PRODUCTS

IRRIGATION EQUIPMENT

Low-cost
SOLAR LIGHTING
with cell-phone chargers
MICRO FINANCE
loans for farming equipment and infrastructure projects
FARM ADVISORY SERVICES (FAS)
sustainable farming techniques
A DAY IN YANGON

Proximity is based in Yangon, Myanmar’s most developed city. It is a port-city, located on the banks of the Irrawaddy Delta, where you will find bustling street markets, Buddhist monks walking the street in-line to collect alms, men and women wearing the traditional Burmese longyi, and street vendors selling fragrant jasmine bouquets to the city’s thousands of cab-drivers. It is a city that is visually striking and rich in cultural history.
Rattan Ball, a traditional Burmese game, a cross between volley-ball and soccer...sort of.
A boy selling jasmine
Buddhist monks pushing alms cart
Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon’s most iconic temple.
Night Market
My first research trip was to Nyaung Bogo, a village township in Myanmar’s Dryzone. I teamed up with Proximity’s Farm Advisory Services (FAS), a dynamic team of experienced farmers who advise Burmese farmers on sustainable practices. The Dryzone, as the name suggests, does not receive much annual rainfall. This presents unique farming challenges that the FAS team helps solve. The purpose of this trip was to observe what kinds of media the farmers currently use and have access to, so that Proximity can more efficiently communicate their Farm Advisory Service techniques.
Nyaung Bogo is a village without access to running water. One way villagers receive water is by walking to man-made reservoirs. The reservoir seen here was a Proximity-initiated project.
Nyaung Bogo is a village located several hours from Bagan. There are few paved roads, and very few vehicles. Transportation in this village is primarily by ox-drawn cart.
Without access to an electricity grid, many families will rig lights or appliances to a car battery.
First visit to farm-house. Clay pots out front collect rainwater.
These farmers are growing beans, not for harvest, but to use for fertilizer, a strategy to benefit the next season's harvest.
FAS staff explained how the roots of this plant are high in nitrogen, and can be used as a natural fertilizer—a safe and healthy alternative to chemical fertilizer.
Conversational research format allows farmers to voice their concerns, challenges, and success stories. Notice one farmer on his cell phone. We asked them about viability of a mobile-phone app. Farmers are very interested in new technology.
Connecting with family members of the farm
While my Burmese teammates were conversing with the farmers, I went to talk to their kids to learn about what types of media they use.
They showed me several printed booklets. These books were 1 or 2-color prints.
This kind of print (1 or 2 color risograph) are informative and inexpensive to make.
The next research trip was to Mawlamyine Gyun, a village township in Myanmar’s Delta, with the Farm Advisory staff. Mawlamyine Gyun is a township directly on the Irrawaddy Delta, is abundant with river water and rain, and as a result, has different crops and different needs than the Dryzone. The purpose of this trip was to observe what kinds of media the farmers currently use, so that Proximity can expand upon the communication of Farm Advisory Service techniques. The Delta region has a more successful farming environment. Mobile phones are used more widely here than in the Dryzone, so the primary focus of this trip was to measure interest in a mobile phone app.
We traveled by long-tail boat to reach a rice-farming community in Mawgyun.
Arriving to meet rice farmers who have been utilizing Proximity's Farm Advisory Services
Rice Farmer and family we met, and his home on the Delta.
Learning about rice farming techniques to be included in FAS instruction manual.
Conversational research format allows farmers to openly discuss what is working for them and what can be improved upon. How can Proximity communicate Farm Advisory Services more swiftly?
Here we discussed the posters and calendars displayed on the walls of this farm-house (see next page), books on their shelves, and learned about water damage to these media types. We also measured their interest in mobile phone apps and instructional video. Several members of the village had a cell phone or portable dvd player.
Print media in these villages was not common. It came in the form of “freebie” posters and calendars from products that were bought in the village town-center.

Here we showed instructional farming videos on an iPad. The farmers were very interested in and excited about new technology. We learned that instructional videos for “how to fertilize” and “how to kill pests” was a top priority, and that video was a format they felt was most effective.
3 TAKE-AWAYS FROM THESE FIELD VISITS

1. “SEEING IS BELIEVING”
   
   ACTION — SHORT FILMS

2. Word-of-mouth alone leads to miscommunication
   
   ACTION — CENTRALIZED PRINTED MANUAL

3. “Too much time passes in between FAS field visits”
   
   ACTION — OFFLINE MOBILE APP
DELIVERABLES

Because content was being generated for the Farm Advisory Services deliverables at the same time as my Fellowship, my focus became geared towards generating templates that could be used in the future—after I had left. The templates included typography, photography direction, and layout design.

As soon as the content (copy and photography) was thoroughly written and edited, then this information could be placed into the booklets after I was gone, thereby leaving the team with a system in place, that could be updated as content was completed.

The following pages document the work we generated in the several weeks following our research phase.
PRINT MANUAL

A design project started from scratch, using the design-thinking process from start to finish, to establish a graphic language and clear typographic system to be used for future print projects.
MOBILE PHONE APP

Here is a proposal for the Farm Advisory mobile phone app. Graphic language and color scheme references the existing brand color scheme. The objective of the app is to address the following issues:

1. IDENTIFY PESTS, AND SOLUTIONS

2. IDENTIFY DISEASES, AND SOLUTIONS

3. FERTILIZER TIME-TABLES
JUST THE BEGINNING

By the end of my Fellowship, I learned that there is so much more work to be done. We had just barely scratched the surface of research and potential for design iteration, testing, and solutions.

No matter how remote the location or individual the problem, staying true to the design process revealed some valuable insight into daily concerns and how solutions to these concerns may be created through graphic design, interactive design, and film, in particular.

My goal was to apply what I’ve learned about design and research in this new environment. I was fortunate to work with a team of brilliant individuals from Burma and beyond in order to arrive at the solutions we created.

I hope to have left this team with as many new insights as I myself had gained, and hope to work with them again in the future.

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